

# **Jumping Through the Window and Looking Back**

Research Thesis

Presented in fulfillment of requirements for graduation  
*with research distinction* in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

by

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**Important: It is Essential That You Complete the Following Paperwork Before Your Next Scheduled Appointment. In Order For the Procedure to be As Effective As Possible, It is Crucial That All Sections Are Filled As Extensively and Accurately As Possible.**

*Name: Christopher Daniel Donovan*

*Birth Date: June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1990*

*Height: 6'1''*

*Weight:* I didn't own a scale. Fuck. 158. I guess. Sounded right. That was around where it was a year ago. Whenever I weighed myself last. Had I gotten fatter? No.

*Hair: Brown*

*Eyes: Brown.* Again. Still. Couldn't they pull this info from my files or license or something?

*Hobbies/Interests:* What?

"Dear, are you writing?" Hanna startled me, materializing behind the couch without warning.

"Honey," I responded, twisting my body enough to both face her and obscure the glow of my laptop. "I thought you were sleeping."

"I heard your fingers. The clicking." Her voice masked a yawn and I couldn't tell if she was happy or not to be awake. I couldn't say I was particularly. There was a reason why I had waited for her to go to bed.

“Sorry, love. I do need to get around to finding a new computer. These keys are too rickety.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s more about the walls. Too thin.” She bent to sit next to me and I reached one hand over to close it, sealing the keyboard within and extinguishing the light. Even in the fresh darkness I could see her giving me that look. “Were you actually working on that novel?” Her inflection – that tone. *That novel*. It reduced me, scratched at my ears and I hated it.

“You mean the one you hate?”

“Dear.”

“No.”

“I kind of figured.” Grazed the jugular. “For a second, though, lying in bed, I thought maybe you were. Maybe you were getting something done.” Her voice dropped to a dramatic whisper as she dragged herself closer to me, arm around my shoulder. “That maybe you wouldn’t need to go through this ridiculous surgery.”

“It’s more of a procedure than a surgery, dear,” I sighed. I turned my head and gave her a peck on the cheek and we smiled at each other. “And it’ll go just fine. And afterwards – poof – no more Writer’s Block.”

“It’s experimental. If they knew it would be ‘fine’ it wouldn’t be ‘experimental.’”

“And if no one experimented we’d still be in caves.” This elicited an amused snort from Hanna and it was my turn to shoot her a discomforting look.

“C’mon,” she started with a wicked grin. “You have to see the irony.” Guns loaded, she continued before allowing me a response. “Mister ‘Complains-About-Office-Job-for-Seven-Years.’ Mister ‘I-Have-Writer’s-Block-Forever.’”

“Well,” I started, taking my turn. “After this procedure is all over, I will be able to move on. I’ll be writing the stories you hate, so how about you just be happy I’m doing this, okay?”

There was a silence as we cradled each other and allowed my head to drop onto her shoulder, the oils of my hair against her soft cheek. She kissed the very top of my head and the gentle smack of her lips wisped its way through the quiet and across my ears and I couldn’t help but grin.

“You never did answer my question.”

“What question?” I responded in a whisper, as if anyone would care to hear us.

“What were you writing?”

“You never asked me that. But I was finishing up the procedure application.”

“You were already selected, weren’t you?” Her tone grew an edge; the procedure was a needlessly-sore subject and it was becoming a greater and greater annoyance to discuss it with her.

“I misspoke,” I clarified. “Of course I’m already in. They just need a second sheet of info so they know how to tailor the experience.”

“Like a dossier?” The word flailed in her mouth, flopped out ‘doss-eer,’ and I fought my own tongue so as not to correct her.

“Sure. Dear.”

“Like the one you have on that May?” I had to catch myself before moving forward; the name had been unexpected, a reminder of things I had been trying to hide.

“My doctor?” I responded.

“Do you know another May?” Her voice was now a grating deadpan, even more passive-aggression.

“No,” I replied in all brevity. “Course not. Why would I? I just didn’t realize you knew her.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Why would it be?” I punctuated this with a chuckle and a smile in order to frame it as a loving joke.

“You never mentioned your doctor was a woman. A young woman.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, no,” she said with her voice dancing across octaves. “I know she’s very qualified. Has PhDs in everything. I found your little bio on her abandoned under junk mail. She seems nice. Likes carrot cake. Listens to good music.”

“Yeah, I was thinking of taking her to that carrot cake concert.” Hanna both chuckled and narrowed her eyes at me and I couldn’t hide a shit-eating grin. “Third date, too. You know what that means.”

“Fuck off,” she laughed.

“But seriously,” I said. “For the procedure to work best, we need to be operating on a level of synchronicity that requires this kind of shared, intimate knowledge.”

Hanna scoffed. In a cute way, though. “She said that?”

“She’s the *doctor*,” I replied. “And if it cools you down at all, there is a man as well.” This elicited a borderline-exaggerated laugh from her.

“Honey,” she dripped. No matter the tone, the word always seemed to be laced with condescension. “I’m not jealous. I just knew you could never use words like ‘synchronicity’ or ‘operating’ conversationally.”

“I don’t think that’s fair.”

“How so?”

“I can’t think of a reason I’d have needed to use those words.”

“So, you and her will be doing this procedure together?”

Yes, dear. She’s the doctor.” More silence. Hanna eventually detached from me, uncoiled her arm and began heading back to the bedroom.

“Well, I suppose you don’t need me out here,” she said.

Why did you come out in the first place? To make me feel useless? To interrogate me? I couldn’t bring myself to vocalize these questions and instead stood up from the couch and followed her.

“Don’t you have to finish your application or whatever?” she asked lazily.

I shrugged. “It’ll be there in the morning.”

## **She Likes Carrot Cake**

*May Alexis Statler*

*Born January 27<sup>th</sup>, nineteen eighty-eight; age twenty-seven. Five-three. One-hundred-eleven lbs. Hazel eyes. Blonde hair. Pale complexion. Received Masters in Neuroscience and Psychology from University of Chicago in two-thousand-twelve; top of her class. Received her undergraduate degree in Psychology from Northwestern in two-thousand-nine. Graduated from Pekin Community High School – ninety-ninth percentile – in Pekin, IL in two-thousand-six. Perfect scores on both ACT and SAT, as well as on SATII Math II.*

*Chess club and 'Magic: The Gathering' club all through high school. Fencing club through ninth grade, but had to retire due to respiratory problems. Complications found to be non-lethal as long as physical exertion is avoided. Enjoys watching solo sports – fencing, boxing, singles tennis – but not team sports. In what spare time she has she often cooks, mainly French cuisine.*

*Childhood asthma advanced into the rare, restricting respiratory disorder she has to this day. Although not formally diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, she is a slave to cleanliness and organization. Perfect eyesight (twenty-twenty). No history of broken bones or exterior physical trauma besides respiratory. Allergic to bees and pollen but no food.*

*As stated, prefers French food; favorite foods include duck breast, foie gras, quail, scallops. Chooses tea over coffee, specifically green tea, specifically oolong. Favorite fruits are*

*plums and blueberries. Vegetables: radish, cucumber, carrots. Tries to limit gluten consumption but is partial to carrot cake.*

Jesus, despite all her accolades and degrees she was obviously lacking in the right-brain. Facts upon facts upon facts just filed into lines, masquerading as sentences. Sure, the dossiers were meant for a tangentially-medical purpose – existing solely to convey distilled information – but even still, they were skeletal. She could’ve tried to pump it up with something. Or at least ordered it in a more-sensible manner. The facts were cluttered; they were lumped into paragraphs that appeared to have themes, such as ‘education’ or ‘appearance.’ Some kind of effort had been made, although not an entirely successful one. It may not have been essential, but it lacked a soul.

In a way, though, it meant a lot to me. The format was clunky, but the simplicity was intriguing. Reading it, I had a false sense of understanding the person in front of me and I relished it.

It made me happy, escaping that ritual of actually meeting a person. Some part in the back of my brain decided to read the dossier like a post on a dating website – not that I had or would have used one, because I was twenty-five and not a forty-year-old divorcee. It had that kind of vibe, though, like a lonely woman scrawled this out on her laptop in hopes that someone out there would like it, think they were compatible, and want to call them up for a nice French dinner or some tennis or whatever. I didn’t know how dating sites worked.

I suppose there was a better way to explain it, the ‘ritual.’ I was sick of the ritual, because it felt – it was – so fake. You saw someone you liked – or think you like, because they look cool or sexy or interesting or what have you – and you just talked to them. And you had to pull out all



these strange steps, these moves; you asked them their name, you talked about the day – the weather or just whatever the hell happened to be in proximity that you thought you could talk about and not sound like a total idiot – and just trusted that they were telling the truth or that they were even interested or that you were even interested once they opened their mouth. Then you asked them to go some place completely different, maybe they'd like to sit in a dark room with you and stare at a screen or maybe they'd enjoy a free meal surrounded by a hundred other loud awkward people. At least, in the dark room, everyone was silent. They just shut up and watched the film. Afterwards you would have enough to talk about to last the drive home; 'Oh, that part was funny. I liked that scene. Who was that actor again? I had a great night. Bye.' Anything else you did you'd have to keep that previous idle chat up for an hour, two or sometimes even three. They said something, then you said something, then you both laughed and then they said something about themselves again.

It went on and on until the night was over and then a few days later you would have to do it all over again and then again and again until one of you decided you didn't want to see the other one anymore. Or died.

It was absurd to me, perplexed me to no end, how inefficient this ritual was. It was a sort of nonsensical voodoo or witchcraft, like eighteenth-century farmers that buried an ox horn at the full moon and sacrificed a newborn so their wheat would grow tall for the season. It was two plus two equals five.

It was taking ten connecting flights to get to a single destination. I was just supposed to pretend I wasn't just interested in this person because I wanted to sleep with them. It managed to somehow both be an elephant in the room and a subtle little mouse carcass we just swept under a rug. I mean, they had to be aware of that, right? What other motivation would anyone really have

for walking up to a near-complete stranger and talking to them? What other motivation was it even possible to have at that point, them being near-complete strangers? At that point – that initial judgment – I had based my opinion solely on appearance, because I had nothing else to base it on.

And on some level, they thought the same exact thing. They saw me come up and started listening to whatever shit I was saying and – sure, maybe the three sentences I managed to babble out sway their opinion somehow – they had absolutely no reason to agree to spend time with me without processing whether or not they would eventually fuck me. And it was excruciatingly bizarre – apparently only to me – that we wasted so much time playing coy and looking the other way.

I was ranting to myself again, chasing tails in my head, but the simplicity of the dossier in front of me was – and I know this isn't the right word, but I'm drawing a blank – inspiring. I had all the information I needed on sheets of paper; there was everything from favorite movies to a family tree. I continued to read, learning every school she'd attended, every house she'd lived in, every boyfriend she'd had. There was every love and every fear and everything in between, stained onto white page with ink in easily-consumable bursts of words. I turned pages and pages and after fifteen or so minutes I knew her. She was there in my mind, a full-formed, multidimensional character who lived a life.

May Alexis Statler was part of me now; I didn't have to be her friend or co-worker or date on and off for two years and never speak to her again. There was no asking her how her dog was doing since the surgery or buying her a macchiato in an empty café mid-day because she

only had thirty minutes in between work and errands but still really really wanted to see you. Fifteen minutes and she was real in my mind. It was relieving, empowering.

I wished everyone had a dossier like this, just carried copies with them wherever they went. You could do the whole meet-cute thing, bump into someone on a bus or in a store or anywhere, really. There wouldn't be any hassle, any flustered stuttering or nerves generating sweat. Just swap bios, skim the pages, and save yourselves three years and a messy breakup.

## Prep

Upon arriving at the psych ward I was immediately led to an empty exam room – I felt special, no waiting – and asked to disrobe and don one of those silly hospital robes that were impossible to tie all the way in the back. There were hospital socks, too, which had extra rubbery traction on the soles; this was a part of the hospital wardrobe I was unfamiliar with, based on my knowledge of dramatic television and film scenes. Or maybe I just never paid attention to feet.

They told me this was where they would ‘prep’ me for the procedure. If they hadn’t wanted me to think of this as a surgery, maybe they should’ve told the nurses not to throw around, ‘prep.’ As I looked around, I didn’t find any noticeable difference between this and the last room. To be fair, there were different fixtures. There was a different type of desks and several drawers and cabinets I am sure were filled with medical supplies I had no clue how to properly use. I found myself wondering how effective this layout truly was. It felt fairly arbitrary, and it bothered me that an entire room in the building – possibly several – was being wasted. Thinking further, the waiting room was useless; it was just space to sit until a nurse gave you permission to wait in another, smaller room. I’m sure I heard that somewhere, like a famous comedian did that bit before. It’s so obvious it had to have been done before.

Furthermore, I was expecting several IVs to be shoved into my arm, or at least some sort of heart monitor with the display that fluctuates and spikes steadily. Maybe a syringe of a strange dye or fluid. A juice box for sugar, at least. The more I dug into my thoughts, the more I realized how little I knew about the real goings-on of doctoral work. Hospital operations and the like were as familiar to me as television allowed them to be. I’d never broken a bone, never been

seriously ill. Didn't have any inherent conditions or syndromes. I had visited a grandparent in the hospital before, but I was young and they died soon after. I didn't remember much of it, much of them. They were old. It smelled bad. Lots of beeps and lights and things attached to things. God, there I went, spiraling again.

May re-entered once I had finished changing. She didn't bring any syringes or machines, just thick packets of paper under her arm. Not that the first thing I noticed was what she was carrying; she was beautiful, as enchanting as she had been each of the previous appointments I'd met with her. Her hair was a pleasant blonde and it grabbed my eye. It wasn't platinum like some valley girl bimbo or dirty like a tomboy track star. Just blonde in a refreshingly plain way. It was sleek, shoulder-length and asymmetrical, draped over one side. It had but a slight curve – no curls or anything to mar that straightness – that led it around her face and to the base of her neck. The skin it gave way to was a tint or two paler and, if not for her black shirt-skirt combo, would have bled into the aforementioned lab coat. It called to me images of the soft and the comforting. I also thought of a blank canvas or an empty page, but I tried not to indulge that path.

“Hello again,” she started.

“Hello indeed.”

“How do you feel?” she asked. I was still wallowing in some mild nausea, but I figured it was unimportant.

“Ready,” I replied. She smiled and I felt I had answered correctly.

“Well, Mr. Donovan,” she started, taking the papers from under her left arm. “Before we go on, I'm afraid we have one final exam.” As if predicting a groan from me, she continued, “It will be quick and easy; just a fairly informal conversation. Review, really.”

She handed the papers to me and they felt thick in my hand. The topmost document was something of a biography, my name printed in bold as a header with assorted info trickling down the rest of the page. It was in a format recently familiar to me and, turning the page, I found even more information about myself. Information that went beyond the medical or physical. Things I had scrawled onto surveys, personality tests, questionnaires; papers I didn't think would ever be necessary or see the light of day.

It was my dossier, and I couldn't help but be a little proud at the weight it had, the heft of my existence and the way the density announced that I had lived and things had happened.

Before I could say anything, she began listing. "Christopher Daniel Donovan. Birthday, June eighth, nineteen-ninety. Age twenty-five. Five-eleven. One-fifty-eight. Brown eyes. Brown hair. Graduated from Oberlin in two-thousand-fourteen with dual degrees in English and Creative Writing. Before that, graduated from Whetstone High School in two-thousand-ten. Thirty-two on the ACT. Two-thousand-ten on the SAT. Never participated in after-school athletics; in fact, hates physical exertion. Occasionally enjoys long walks or even hikes through wilderness, but doesn't 'get' camping because – quote – 'humans built houses for a fucking reason' – unquote."

It was impressive, the way she rattled off facts about me like some computer. Amusing, in some way. Falsely flattering in another. Part of me, though, felt like a final exam. Another thing to power through, another letter in the grade book. Something else she could tag onto her dossier next to her Chicago degrees and medical accomplishments.

Of course, she wasn't done. She continued, relishing the chance to exercise this vast pool of esoteric knowledge that she had worked so hard to amass. "Favorite color is red. Favorite food is sushi – specifically spicy tuna. Close seconds are pho, eggs benedict, and oysters. Top five

favorite music acts include The Beatles, no surprise there, Massive Attack, Blur, Fiona Apple, Beck. Authors that inspire him are Albert Camus, Cormac M-“

“I think you pass,” I cut her off. My aim wasn’t to be purposefully rude, but that seemed to be a byproduct. I had no interest in hearing information I already knew, that was already a part of me. Her eyes unglazed and made contact with mine. They were hazel and well-framed among her cheeks and nose. They did seem a touch dull, as if all the hours spent sifting through medical journals and textbooks had sanded them down. Honestly, they befit a professional such as herself; her eyes kept her calluses.

“Aspires to be a published novelist,” she said, ignoring my comment. “How is that novel going, by the way? Did you decide how to kill your protagonist?”

My immediate thought was that the question was strange, stupid even. The novel was in no way going well and if it had been I wouldn’t have been here. With my doctor, though, I could demonstrate a touch more patience. “Can’t say I’m sure yet.”

“But you’re sure he’ll die?”

“He has to,” I replied. “Suicide, probably.”

“C’est triste,” she said with a pouty face and perfect French.

“I forgot you were a Francophile,” I said, steering the conversation away from my incomplete writings.

“Well,” she responded. “If you would please turn to the second packet I handed you. We can’t have you forgetting things about me.”

I did as she said and was surprised to find that it was not one thick stack of paper about me, but two separate packets. “It’s my dossier. All necessary info on me.”

“No, I can see what it is,” I replied. I could read. I read for four years of college straight. “I’ve already read this, though.” It dawned on me that I had probably been inconsiderate. “Of course, I wouldn’t be against learning more.”

She laughed, and the sound she made was predictably adorable and pixie-like. “Oh, I’m sure you read it front to back. Still, we can’t have you forgetting more details like that.”

“Like the French?” I tried to inflect some type of concern, but it seemed trivial to me. It was such a minor, insignificant detail.

“This is a landmark in medical treatment,” the response already in the chamber. She didn’t seem hurt or offended; hell, she had taken the time to learn everything about me, so it made sense she predicted my speech patterns, rehearsed what she was going to say. I could see it now: her, standing in front of a bathroom mirror, holding the dossier – one she herself typed out – like a script. She was thinking of me, her mind lingering on every possible word or phrase or response I would have in my arsenal. She practiced and practiced harder, pretending that she knew me, crafting this version of me in her head. She became a sort of robot; one programmed with my identity, my origin story and current issues. I expected her, like the robots of an eighth-grade speaking class, to churn out monotone answers based on formulas wired into their brains from nights spent in front of mirrors.

Her voice was soft, though. High, and much more pleasing than the monotone of the other doctors I had dealt with. I imagined myself crawling up into my ear and taking a nap with it. It sounded natural, unrehearsed in a rehearsed manner. She had an innate charisma – although, for some reason, I found ‘charm’ to be a better word. When I thought about ‘charisma’ it felt laced, deceptive, like the speech of a dictator or a cheesy car salesman. ‘Charm’ was friendlier, gentler, more attractive. I could fall in love with charm.



“I am going into your mind with you in order to assure everything goes as we planned. More or less, of course.” There it was, a sliver of doubt. I would like to think that, with all their degrees and experience and research, they would be more certain. Okay, even if they weren’t, I suppose it couldn’t be helped. But they didn’t have to let me know that. What good did honesty do me once the drugs kicked in and I was on a table? Still, I nodded for her to continue.

“A lot of it is obviously up to you and how your brain and mind interpret the internalization; what they project and form around us. But that in itself is a reason you need me.” Dramatic pause, a convenient gap for me to fill with any questions I may have had. I didn’t. Eye contact, those hazel eyes – but god damn had I thought about her too much already. Another nod. “Psychology, as a study, exists because humans do not understand their minds. They need our aid to unearth any number of things that lay under layers of memories and seemingly-useless thoughts.

When you – we – go under and into your mind, there’s no telling what you’ll discover. Of course, there’s a type of framework structure that the mind follows – like a building – but the interior design is completely different person-to-person.” I felt we were talking in circles, but it was extraordinary how much of a difference it made that the voice I was listening to was hers. “Or, in theory it is,” she added. “Again, you’re the first, after all.

Anyway, without a trained professional like me, it would be near-impossible to navigate your own mind. At the same time, it’s a kind of two-way street. When I’m in there, I’m at the mercy of your perception. Looking at me – listening to me – gives you only the most superficial details. If we don’t know each other, things could go wrong.”

“Like, we could get lost?”

“Yes, lost. Or die.”

I wasn't going to die.

"Another reason I'm going with you," she continued, ignoring the morbidity hanging from her last sentence, "is to experience the procedure firsthand. Take notes, notice anomalies, and do more practical research. Everything we have done so far has been hypothetical; predictions and preparation. Of course, you know this. You're the first test subject." It was strange being referred to as a test subject; only in comics and sci-fi films did a person become a 'test subject.' Having been nursed on the stuff for an entire childhood, I couldn't say I minded it. "Being the first, we absolutely need someone in there to record how it goes, what needs to be changed."

"Understandable," I replied, trying to sound coherent, mature, responsible. A single word, but enough syllables for my tongue to feel significant.

"More importantly, though, is that if I get lost in your mind, the procedure is an effective failure."

Yet another statement that confused me. I had questions, but of course I had them. I had asked them after every statement said to me since I arrived at the doctor's office this morning. At this point, I wasn't sure what good asking them would do anyone. No matter what I said, they had the answers. This May Statler, she typed that bio – read it inside and out afterwards, too. I didn't need to say any more; I could just give her this confused look like what I imagined was on my face right now and she would know. Like an actress, she knew her lines regardless of whether I said mine or not. I nodded and she gave an answer to my silence.

"See, again, I cannot overstate how powerful the mind is, and we are quite literally going inside yours. Everything that occurs when inside there is, on a very subconscious level, because of some knowledge or belief or perceptive you have stored in any section of you. Because of

this, you need to have as much information about me as possible stored before I enter. Any person we see or run into while inside your mind is just your perception of that person – an avatar of sorts.”

“No, I see what you are saying,” I cut in. “But I’m still not getting why I need to read this again. I mean, if you’re really going into the procedure with me, then I know it’s really you.”

“You would think that,” she replied. “And it’s entirely possible. But the simple answer is that we don’t know for sure, because you are the first. There is a chance that however you perceive me will simply overwrite whatever persona I have before entering your mind. It’s small, but even the smallest chance is something to account for. Thus, some light re-reading.” She gestured at the packet in my hand as if nudging me to read it. It wasn’t worth complaining about, but she must have anticipated some form of protest, because she added, “You should be used to it by now, English major.” It wasn’t nasty, but more of a playful voice. I perceived it as coy, toying, nearing flirtation. But I knew it wasn’t.

## **The Procedure Begins**

They led me into an operating room of sorts. The trip felt relatively informal; I was on my two feet, not wheeled in on a table like the hospital scene I envisioned. Just a nice stroll into a life-changing procedure. Dr. Statler was on my left, dressed in a hospital gown identical to mine. Where mine looked goofy and drab, hers looked almost ethereal, the way it was draped so gently over her flesh. It may have been because I'd only seen her previously in full doctor-lab-coat attire, but the gown looked so thin and delicate and I tried – albeit halfheartedly – to not dream up some perverted fantasy of the scantily-clad doctor. I tended to forget how lecherous my mind was until something provoked it, like the bits of Statler's skin peeking through the back of the gown. It made me feel immature, like I had regressed to middle school, but I often couldn't help but indulge certain flights like these; I pictured May Statler's gown being undone, some trick of gravity unraveling the already-loose knot resting just above her butt.

Fuck I had a problem.

The first things I noticed upon entering the room were the two chairs placed in the center. They were completely tricked out in the familiar, unidentifiable medical gear. Off-green padding spread over both like a seat from a dentist's office. The head was caged in some comically sci-fi-looking apparatus, and I winced at the thought of the contraption pressing against my temples. The needles and IVs and restrains that made up the arm rests gave me a similar queasiness. Wiring and tubing in metallic shades ran across the backs and fed into a large computer server-looking device that lay several feet behind them. Both seats looked like prototypes, rough around

the edges and without that sleek, streamlined commercial appearance even other medical gizmos like MRIs and scales had. They were a black paint-job away from being torture devices.

“Don’t be scared,” said May.

“I’m not,” I replied with a gulp.

There were two men – one aside each chair in little wheelie seats of their own – fully scrubbed up like they were all ready to operate on some poor fellow. I had the feeling they were just wearing them for show, to feel important. They were fiddling with the various parts and cords on the back – I’m assuming double-checking them, making sure they were ready for use. I watched them shift wires one way and pull them another and check gauges and temperatures and the front part of my head spun a bit. It baffled me, what they were doing, and how little I knew, and how I would never have known where to even begin maintaining – let alone constructing – such strange machines. It was all impressive and all so confusing. But regardless of what was going on, I felt like they could have worked it out in t-shirts or something. They acknowledged us with a glance through their plastic goggles but remained wordless.

As May approached one of the seats they cleared a path for her. One of them waved to me, signaled me to follow her lead. I stood, though, watched her do it first. Watched as she squirmed between the bars and wires, her body folding and reforming. Once she settled in, she gave me a reassuring smile. It was a smile of relief, of confidence. Her idea, the idea that you could walk into a person’s mind and finagle all of this abstraction into cohesion, was her brainchild and it was now on the cusp of maturation. She had erected a frontier only before seen in science fiction, comparable to waiting to witness the first shuttle launch into space, waiting to see the hypotheticals at last align into reality; a culmination of an amount of work and effort and

technicality that physically staggered me when I took the time to consider it. It probably felt orgasmic, a release of stratospheric magnitude, to have made it to this point.

“Go ahead,” she said. “We need to begin.” Obediently, I tried to imitate her, awkwardly squeezing into the remaining seat. I immediately felt the unsettling stick of the plastic against my skin and each movement I made to settle into the device created that unsavory sucking, peeling sound.

Once I was finally comfortable, one of the scrubs gripped my forearm – firmly enough that it bothered me – and prepped a needle with his other hand. He turned my arm over and told me to look away, despite the fact I already was. With a sharp squeeze I knew it was through me, under me, and I couldn’t help but sour my face. He released my arm. I returned my gaze to find I had a new vein; it was plastic and ran from the submerged bump in my arm up to some of those bags and machines and whatnot that were commonplace in such procedures.

“Don’t worry,” May said, a proxy for the still-silent technician. “It’s just to put you to sleep. Nothing else.”

“I’m not worried,” I replied.

“Well, stay that way,” she said in jest. As we continued talking, the technicians attached more straps and lowered apparatuses onto our heads – something akin to an x-ray. All the clanking and notching nearly overshadowed May’s words, but I clung to them intently. “In a moment you’ll hear a sudden hum. That’s just the device uploading and syncing our brain patterns.”

“What?”

“You know, it doesn’t really matter. What’s important is that, once we’re inside your mind, we meet up and sift through your memories together. Make sure to find me.”

I heard the click of a switch but was unable to see where it was or who did the clicking. However, it didn’t really matter; there was that hum May had mentioned. At least, it started as a hum. It accelerated as if one of the technicians had some foot on a pedal outside my peripheral vision. It grew louder and louder until it was a physical presence pressing against my inner ears. Then, finally, a pop. I had been deafened. My sight began to blur, all the light and colors of the operating room blending into a single pane of blotchy white. Blind. Seconds – hell if I know how many – passed and the chair began to violently vibrate. Or maybe it was just me; maybe my physical body was reacting poorly to having its mind copy-pasted into a strange machine, the inner workings of which it was completely unacquainted to. Like shoving a square peg into a circle. There was no way to tell in my sensory-deprived condition. I did feel trickles of vomit inching up the back of my throat and I began dry-heaving. My chest rattled wildly, suffering at the mercy of these combined involuntary motions, and I could’ve sworn I heard – probably only imagined, though – technicians panicking, voices rising and falling.

Then I blacked out.

## **The Work Day**

There was a very intimate café across the street from my office. I saw it every day, probably every minute; the building I work within had great big glass panels in place of walls. It was very chic and the sun would hit it in such a way that it glistened when you were staring at the exterior. But it was horribly uncondusive to production. I could just gaze out the wall all day and I – without exaggeration – often would. It was seductive, being able to lift my eyes from the keyboard or files or whatever and rest them on the outside world with such ease. It was astonishing how fascinating a coffee shop and a slow intersection seemed when you were locked in a cubicle for eight hours.

Any way, there was this coffee shop; a small, local place – they roasted their own beans and all that fancy shit – but retaining this modern, sexy look. Their storefront was also one giant window, showing off the sleek interior. The counter was an oval of sorts, right in front when you walked in, the epicenter of the shop. The machines lined it, all matte-black and curved and new-agey, punctuated with funnels of glass and porcelain; a barista – coated in fresh hipster paint – would take an order and could simply rotate positions with a coworker to create the beverage. It was like a garrison or bunker, posted up for the coffee wars, and I often imagined the employees donning forest-green army helmets and taking cover behind the counter, ready to fight off any approaching customers.

What made the aforementioned oval-counter even sleeker were the menus. The walls flanking it had a layer of black chalkboard material over them with the daily roasts and various countries of origins printed over them entirely in lower-case, changing on a near-daily basis. This



left many first-time patrons awkwardly lurking out of line, craning their necks instead of facing forward – not that the place could hold more than a dozen people anyway. Besides getting a chuckle from watching the mild confusion, the layout also left the counter pristine and uncluttered, smooth. Upon reading the ‘menus,’ these customers would discover no fanciful frozen beverages, no sugar-laden mixed drinks. Hell, there weren’t even drip coffees for passersby in a hurry. Their main offering was pourovers, but they also had Chemex. And also this bizarre vacuum-pressure device, but I couldn’t remember the name. There were some other basic options, like lattes and cappuccinos, but I had seen many people looking for something Tim Horton-esque leave disappointed. Some – in fact, many – would call it pretentious. I called it simplistic, beautiful. I called it progress.

The coffee shop and the office building both projected a real aura of civilization and fashion, it was as if the city block was purposefully coordinated. But that made too much sense to be true. Although, what probably happened is that the city planners or architects or whoever designed the district in its entirety; the area of the city was very artsy and modern – ‘hip’ – and I could believe there was an effort made to homogenize and make the buildings look uniform. However, they probably didn’t choose what businesses or what tenants bought up which buildings, which would be why my boring, useless, nine-to-five corporate office building was across from a hotspot coffee shop.

Any way, I stared through to it more than regularly, I’m sure partially because it just happened to be there; I’d have stared at the broad side of a barn if it was the alternative to my desk. I just happened to be relatively lucky to have an interesting and fluid object to fixate on.

It would be dishonest, though, to say that the barista had nothing to do with it. Her name was REGISTERONE, or at least that's what my receipt had said after she rang me out. I had never asked her and they didn't wear name tags – how tacky would that have been in such a café? So, she was REGISTERONE, because why not?

Her hair was a bright green, whimsically dyed like an anime character, and was what grabbed me from across the street, the sidewalks, and the two window panes. It stood out, and I found my eyes following her head as it bobbed up and down in the ocean of pedestrians and cars and customers that came between us. It had been about a year since I first noticed it; since then, her schedule had been steady and I'd learned to keep an eye out for her – simply over time and not in a crazed, 'I need to find every day she works so I can murder her,' stalkery way – every Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

She was snow-pale so, on the shop's slow hours, she stood out easily from the gunmetal grays and metallic blacks and deep-stained woods that constructed the room around her. Her height helped as well, oddly tall for a city girl, almost like an elf or amazoness. I supposed the latter was unfair, as she still retained a pixie-like, hyper-feminine quality – a nauseating cliché, I was aware. Perhaps all the 'indie' comedies and rom-coms and music videos I had been spoon-fed over the years contributed a little too much, but I allowed myself this attraction to these types of girls. I said 'allowed,' but I didn't think I could change if I wanted to. That quality they had – REGISTERONE had – sparked something within me. Images came to me of late nights at concert venues, late mornings cocooned by squirming sheets. Dyed hair and facial piercings basking in daylight as Neutral Milk Hotel played on a distant vinyl.

Words – random words, useless words – would form in my head, thoughts I could verbalize had I the courage to cross the street and speak to her. Of course, I had gone over there.

That was how I got the receipt. I had been there several times, in fact; enough times that the various baristas thought of me as a regular, but purposefully less than enough times to grant the impression I had nothing better to do. No, I always went the morning before work on whatever day I felt I was dressed the best, appeared the healthiest and most rested. Was it vane? Sure. But I only stopped in periodically and I wanted the image she had of me to be as sterling as it possibly could be; I could guarantee REGISTERONE didn't think about me as often as I did her.

So I had spoken to her and, of course, her voice had the exact chirp I imagined it would have. I had spoken to her multiple times, even. Every time I went over there I made sure she was the barista that served me, pretending to read the walls until that green hair rotated into the corner of my view. She would ask what she could get for me and instead of replying with anything clever or unique or meaningful in the slightest I would just ask for a double-shot. A few minutes later I would be back in the office, glaring across the gap once more, espresso bitter in my throat.

These thoughts threw time away and eight hours would whittle down to six and then three and then, before I knew it, there were ten minutes left in the day and all I had done was stare at green hair across the street. What good they did, what their purpose was, I wasn't sure, and it frustrated me. There were times when I could have sworn what I felt was love, that all I wanted to do was curl up across from her on a couch, stare into her eyes until the earth crumbled. There were also times when I knew it was simply lust and it was only the persona she had curated that was grabbing my attention. Erase the green dye, the piercings, the bleach-white skin and she would just be part of the background that exists outside the window.

But she did have all these things. She chose to color her hair and pierce her nose and apply gratuitous layers of makeup to her cheeks. REGISTERONE made the effort to shape

herself into the image she wanted others to view her in, so what was wrong with falling for it? Wouldn't – shouldn't – she be pleased if she knew her trap had worked, that she had been victorious on her hunt?

My day involved a fair amount of typing; more than any other 'work' it was just typing in bulk. Sometimes things would be handwritten. Many times something was handwritten and it needed to be typed and I would be the one to type it in so it was saved in a word document on some server. The first day or two in the office had felt unnatural, sterilizing. At this point, my fingers had hammered keys and gripped pens so often that they were numbed of any feeling. It became an extremely passive activity that allowed my mind – even when my glare was directly on the computer before me and not across the street – to wander.

It was a sandbox, a place where I could make-believe any number of scenarios. In one, I would walk away from my desk mid-day, cross the street, and simply ask for her name. She would smirk because she knew what I wanted and why I was talking to her, but she'd still tell me and then ask for mine. I would ask when she was getting off work (I already knew, but of course she wouldn't know that) and it would be the perfect time because I would also be free and she would agree to have dinner and conversation and we'd have a glowing evening.

All too often I found the antithesis approaching, embarrassment and failure engrained in my skull. I walked in and my mouth opened to ask for her name and the words fumble. Again, there was a laugh, but not a charmed one. Maybe I would try to speak again, but the syllables wouldn't form correctly and I could picture so vividly the look she would give me, somewhere between disgust and pity. Eventually a question would emerge but, by that point, she would be primed to say no to whatever.

Then there was the over-the-top, balls-to-the-walls, abhorrent rom-com scenario. I had run that through several times and it was a fantastically cathartic experience. Rain would be pouring, really coming down hard enough to obscure my view of the café entirely, running endlessly down the glass. I would run across the street – like, full-out sprint, despite it being so close. Even with my superfluous speed, I would enter the café completely drenched; perhaps my pasty, thin physique would be showing through my white office button-up and my hair would be matted down like a stray puppy. The story would pour from my mouth and she would listen intently. I would tell her how the very thought of her carried me through my monotonous existence and how I’d stare at her and yeah yeah yeah all the previously-mentioned garbage and she would swoon, wracked to her core with emotion, borderline unable to comprehend how some guy like me could hold someone like her in such value. We embrace and maybe the other baristas and customers fawn and go, ‘Awwwww.’

There were entire days where I felt like I was on the edge of a cliff, like I just wanted to throw myself over to be done with it; why wouldn’t this work in real life? What about the truth made me sound like an asylum patient?

Of course, I could picture the flipside, where I have this confession – this profound moment of honesty – and she has an understandingly revolted reaction. I would be laughed out of the café, too ashamed to ever return, like some pathetic high schooler. Hell, she may even punch me straight in my blubbering face, just to make it more dramatic. Teeth shattered, life in shambles. Depressing stuff.

On particularly grinding days, my mind would find itself even further out of reality. Again, the setting was the coffee shop; however, I wasn’t there. I watched over in third-person

like a swivel-camera over a film set, watching over her from behind. I would watch as a man entered. He had a handgun and a ski mask, as petty criminals were wont to do, and he'd tell her to put her hands in the air and open the register – obviously not in that order – and etcetera. The one or two patrons in the building would freeze, panic, maybe start to sob. REGISTERONE would definitely be in tears, almost too crippling for her to hand over the couple hundred dollars they kept in the register.

As if omnipresent, I would watch this before snapping smoothly into first-person, walking casually into the shop. Somehow I knew about the armed man on the other side of the door – I mean, it was entirely made of glass, so of course I saw him; for some reason he didn't see me, though, but all of this is beside the point – and I wasn't afraid. I would know what I had to do and in that moment, adrenaline peeking out from whatever crevices of my insides it was hiding, I would be invincible.

I had been to maybe one krav maga class in my life; I mean, I took karate as a kid, like any little boy would do, but I only got to red belt and it was completely worthless anyway. But I had seen all the Bourne-esque films and all the movements I would use – the flow of my arms as I disarmed the assailant, the impact of my fist against his jaw – were so vivid in my head. I would play it cool, though; there was nothing worse than someone who knew they did a good deed and played it up like an asshole. Of course, they would view me as such. I would expect, at the very least, free coffee, but I wouldn't demand it. No, it would be reward enough to see REGISTERONE's reaction, her acknowledgement of my presence and its importance.

I often found myself wishing for this dream to become reality, that I would look up one afternoon through the big glass wall and notice that man with the gun standing in the café. Part of me wanted that opportunity to prove myself, to distinguish myself from every other tie that

walked down that street through her field of vision every day. Another part knew that it was pathetic – pitiable, really – that the first part existed. Still, I would look through the glass with ritualistic devotion, imagining the possibilities behind my eyes while my fingers worked away at things of no consequence.

And one day, it paid off. One day, a very sunny day, I watched as a masked man entered the café. I had noticed him lurking, pacing the block up and down for a solid ten minutes. And I had watched him for all of those ten; he was unusual, a glitch. My hands stopped typing and I just stared, head tilted. The rest of the street was vacant. No customers sat within the café, either. It was him and her. And me, through the window. The surrounding clicks and rings and beeps that made up the office faded even further from my ears, almost unreal. They were nonexistent. Or perhaps I was. They didn't take notice when I stood from my swivel chair and made measured steps for the door. No one stopped me.

Before I had time to think anything, I was reaching for the café's glass door. Even as I was pulling it open, my right foot dragged in protest, despite my heart's steady beat. It wasn't so much fear as it was confusion. Curiosity, perhaps. Like, 'Really? You're really doing this?' Still, I moved, not questioning why, only knowing that I had to do it.

The criminal should've heard me; the café had one of those bells above the door to alert employees when someone entered. He remained forward, though, oblivious. I overpowered him with surprising ease, not even bothering to care who he was or what he had been doing. As he collapsed the gun slid from his hand and I found it in mine. It seemed natural, easy, to pull the trigger, so I did and the man was gone. I never heard the sound of the shot but the recoil pulsed into my forearm and I flinched half-heartedly.

And there she was, looking at me looking down at where the thug had been. There was a belated sigh on her lips, followed by a half-smile. The green of her eyes was misty, just on the cusp of full cry-liner. She was gorgeous.

“Uh, sorry,” I said. She allowed a stilted giggle and I shrugged. I set the gun down on the tiny half-counter and watched as she pulled an espresso, finished steaming a tin of milk, lathered them into a ceramic mug and offer it to me.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Your usual, right?”

“I’ve only been here once before,” I responded with gaiety, stroking the side of my hair with my left hand.

“I suppose I’ve just got a good memory.” She gave a real smile, teeth and everything. They were even white; she didn’t dip into the product. I accepted the beverage with my left hand and extended my right.

“Chris,” I said.

“Hanna,” she replied, shaking my hand gently but without hesitation.

“Hanna. That’s a pretty name.”

“It is,” she said. “But this isn’t how we met”

My brows furrowed although I fought against it, worrying they looked unflattering. “I, uh, I’m not sure I follow.”

“You sit in that corner,” she said, making a pointing motion with mannerisms akin to wood surfacing from water. “Far enough away so as not to creep me out, but close enough to eye-fuck me for as long as possible.”

“Well, that’s not-“



“I bring your dirty chai out to you and you say nothing but a ‘Thank you’ but I sit down with you anyway, start up a conversation. Something meaningless about the weather. You looked lonely. Desperate, even.”

“Yeah-“

“Pathetic.”

“Okay, Hanna. I get it. You’re better than I am.”

“You know I’m not, though. I chose to sit with you. I didn’t tell you then – I didn’t tell you for another four months – but I had just gotten through a pretty gruesome breakup and I was lonely, too.”

“I remember. You said he was a huge dickhead.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Say that.”

“But you’re the one who-“

“I knew him. I’m describing him. You’re using it to sound heroic. To sound better.”

“But-“

“And you aren’t a hero, Chris. You spent a year staring at me from across a street. Through windows.”

“Hanna-“

“Every day.”

“Dear.”

“For a year.” Her smile and her chirp and her green hair betrayed the weight of what she was saying to me. I took my first, brief sip of the latte. “Is it good?”

“Yeah,” I said. I drank again.

“As good as you remember it?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because this latte never existed. And now I think you should leave.” She said it with the inflection of a suggestion, but I knew I didn’t have a choice. She turned away, began cleaning milk residue from the steam machine, and with a timid wave I made my way to the door.

“See you later?” I said.

“Sure, of course,” she replied, looking away from the machine long enough to shoot me one last glance. “Oh,” she said, waving her arm in the direction of the counter. “Take him with you, please.” I looked down at the still-masked corpse. “He can’t just stay here.”

“Oh. Right.”

## **In Writing, Legally Bound**

“You know, we also have cheaper units; many of the first-floor apartments have slight downgrades in the features. You know, older carpeting, no intercom. Less kitchen space.”

“No thanks,” I replied, exchanging smiling glancing with Hanna. “We want the one we just toured. That exact one. It was perfect. We want the kitchen and the dishwasher and the washer-dryer combo and the nice carpet. And the intercom. Even though we don’t have any friends or anyone we’d ever need to invite over. Just so we have it.”

“Fantastic. I have the lease printed out. Right here. Now, it’s all pretty standard stuff; twelve-month – that’s one year – lease. Rent will be deducted from your approved bank accounts automatically on the second of every month – each of the twelve – and will be divided fifty-fifty between the two of you. Smart. Fair. You know, it’s always a good sign when the couple’s reliant on each other like that. Even Steven, I always say. Along the same lines, the electric has been put under her name and the water under yours; that’s real great of you and golly you’re both such a swell couple. The water, man, it sounds simple. It is simple, really. It’s water. One easy payment per month. But, you know, it’s water. Everything. Every shower she takes, every pasta dish she boils. Every load of laundry she runs. That’s you, man. Or, of course, a larger, quarterly payment is a possible option many occupants find preferable.

So if you’ll initial here, this just agrees that you’re liable for any accidental damage – fire, mainly. Fire’s the big one – that may have been caused by you. Yes, we recommend you find renter’s insurance; actually, it’s required and upon signing this lease you’re legally bound to having some form of it by the date you move in. No, you don’t both need it. And if I’m being

perfectly honest, it would be a waste. If, say, your stuff gets burnt up in a fire, how are they going to be able to tell whose it was? Say Chris here has the insurance under his name: who's to say he didn't own those pretty rompers and heels that got all charred up? It's America. You can dress how you want, I don't care. No judgment. All the stuff is in the same apartment; who knows who owns what anymore. He puts those on the insurance claim and boom, covered. Also, don't bring lice, bedbugs, vermin, etcetera in here. Vermin spread quickly and you would be responsible for any building-wide treatment. Obviously.

Legal jargon, legal jargon, more jargon, you get the idea. You know I can't wait for you to sign the last page of this and begin scrounging many hundreds, thousands, of dollars from you over the coming months – twelve of them, a year – but I just have to ask you one final question: really? Are you really ready for this? Not that monogamy is bad. It's great. For now. For the next month and the one after that. Until January, even – you need someone to kiss on New Year's. And she's a great girl, Hanna. Real independent spirit. Artsy, like you. But practical. Nowhere near as heady, knows how to direct her energy. A positive foil for you, honestly. You know all this. You've known all this for years now. But – here's the thing – you've never *had* to know it. If you wanted to, you could ignore it. You could end it. There would be some tears. Many questions, probably some yelling but hey, like pulling a bandaid off, right? No, no, of course you didn't want to. But you could have. Your prison still had a window with a bright view and a fresh breeze.

But it's here, man. It's gone, as soon as your signature is on here. Twelve months of it, guaranteed. Okay, so in theory you could break up. Then you're just living, sleeping with, someone you hate now. Or maybe one of you moves out; good luck with that. Most of me doesn't give much of a fuck. You're legally obligated to pay me monthly – twelve months –

regardless of who sleeps where. So you know, on those same lines, you're legally obligated to get along. And, of course, you can't imagine feeling any of this right now, so wide-eyed. Well, being so close to your yin makes your yang more apparent, too. And you hate that. Eventually you'll feel it. And okay, you're telling yourself a year isn't so bad. You've lived twenty-some of them already and from what you recall most of them were pretty successful. Hell, you're still alive and you don't remember most of the boring, useless ones. Even if something happens to the two of you, you'll survive. You'll persevere until the tenth or eleventh month and then find a new place.

But who are you kidding; where do you really go from there? What are you going to say come next June? That you decided you want a shitty studio apartment where you can bang other women? That you want to still see her, just not every day and every night in the same bed in a shared room? It's a big-enough pain to hire *one* moving company.

So I guess what I'm trying to say here is thanks for choosing Coventry Apartments and I look forward to seeing you in this office, resigning this lease, next year.

## A Waste of Time

“Forty pages, huh? That’s kind of a lot.” There was some surprise in Hanna’s inflection, and I wasn’t sure if I was to be smug and pleased or insulted.

“It is and it isn’t, dear.” I clicked a few more keystrokes before slowing to a halt; it was unusual, talking and writing at the same time.

“I mean, relatively it’s a lot. Just this past month you’ve been really writing.”

“I’ve been calling myself a writer for a while now,” I replied. “At some point, I knew I’d have to do it.”

“What’s it about?”

“What?”

“Tell me about it,” she said. It wasn’t clear what she was doing or even where and when we were, but I felt the waft of her hair and the warmth of her breath resting on the left of my neck and I knew she was trying to read my work, trying to discern anything about it – about me – regardless of context.

“It isn’t finished.”

“Obviously,” she replied. “You know what it’s about though, right? How it ends? I mean, why would you just start something without seeing it through?”

“It’s hard to explain. More of a character study than a full story.”

“Try anyway,” she chirped nearly directly into my ear. “It’s not like I’m going anywhere.”

It examined the human condition, but I would never say that out loud because everyone else had and the phrase was so hollow it made me want to take a cast-iron skillet to my forehead. More specifically, it followed a protagonist – still unnamed – who was a Mary-Sue. From childhood into his early thirties, when the novel is set, he would be able to do, learn, whatever anything right away. Like a superpower. Like a parody. Every test in school he aced. Every sport he played ended in his victory. He was never injured. He played the stock market and found himself several thousand dollars richer overnight. He could do no wrong.

It examined the lives we lead and how vacant they were. How this society shaped our lives into an endless wheel of manila nothing. How even this man who had the potential to take everything had to still give. He paid taxes and worked and eventually had kids and raised them in a big suburban cul-de-sac and no matter what life would just chip away and away at him. It was rather equalizing and, I realized, abstractly depressing. Surely too depressing for Hanna.

“I don’t get it,” she said.

“You can read it when it’s finished. Hopefully it’ll make more sense then.”

“But why is he good at everything?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, how does that happen?” Looking at her, she appeared genuinely confused.

Granted, she wasn’t my target audience. But this wasn’t a good sign.

“Well, he was just born that way.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she said, somewhere between a scoff and a chortle. I was honestly surprised she was taking such a firm stance against a fictional character. My fictional character.

“How so?”

“No one is born perfect.”

“Well of course not. Dear. Not in real life.”

“It just seems extremely unrealistic,” she continued. Narrowing my eyes was all I could do to keep from rolling them. “Like, you have to work for nearly everything in life.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?”

“Of course,” I whisper-shouted. “But that’s what this guy does. That’s how *I* wrote his character. You don’t hear people complaining about where Superman came from.”

“They explain where he came from, Chris. He’s an orphaned alien. That’s something. Your character – I’m just supposed to accept that he doesn’t struggle? Everyone goes through some shit, some messy fucking swamp before they accomplish whatever, and he’s *never* had some sort of doubt or difficulty? How is that believable? Or interesting?”

“Dear, real life is unfair. Some people out there are born into castles and mansions and do cocaine off golden bars. Others are born into ditches and scrape grease from under dumpsters to live. I don’t see what’s so unbelievable, so uninteresting, about someone who was born with *all* advantages and nothing keeping him from anything he wanted. How would that shape his life? Would he be completely spoiled? Would he spiral into depression because nothing challenged him? It’s a fascinating – brilliant – character study. Wouldn’t you be interested in it on *some* level? Wouldn’t you read this novel?”

“No. Not really, no.”

“Goddammit, it’s like talking to a grade schooler.”

“Does that mean you’ll stop talking to me?”



I closed my laptop. Or maybe it was already closed. Anyway, she was standing now. Above me, towards the kitchen now. I stood up to be her equal, to look her in the eyes and cradle her hand in mine. Maybe she was doing the cradling and I was just happy to feel her warmth.

“Of course not.”

“Even though I obviously hate this novel and will never read it, even if you finally finish it?”

“I really don’t remember you being this confrontational.”

“You don’t remember a lot of things, Chris. But you’re still with me.”

## Every Book You'd Ever Need

The city library was massive, an impressive collaborative feat between architecture and literature on the average day, but an inconvenience when I was running ten minutes late. It welcomed all with the scent of sweet mildew and puffy, stale seats for overworked grad students and the homeless alike. The winding corridors lined with ceiling-to-floor bookshelves and spiraling staircases stretching up fifteen floors was notorious for disorienting visitors in the most glorious way possible. It was a labyrinth loosely propped up by the Dewey Decimal System.

I was supposed to meet Hanna in the lobby, but five minutes after entering those towering gates I was still peeking down aisles trying to find her. After failing to find her in the lobby, I decided to journey to the poetry section on the ninth floor; it was always an early stop on our grand tours of the library, and I was hopeful that she had simply started without me.

I was taking the long way – I was already late. What would another few minutes be? – scaling stairs and ignoring the tinny corner elevators. Mid-step winding past the fourth floor, something caught my eye, something out of place. It stood out, even to me, someone who was rarely found on the fourth floor. Hanna and I had been through it – although we had seen nearly every section of the place, we frequented it so often – on our first trip here, one of our first dates. Years ago. We didn't take a map or those little brochures at the front desk or anything. We didn't – still don't – know how to navigate however the library was organized and we didn't want to know. We were prepared to discover the abyss, absorb whatever the endless ocean of words would provide for us. The fourth floor had been a disappointing reservoir, pooling only the kind

of books I had refused to open, let alone drop three-hundred dollars on, back in college. We cracked a few books and hadn't returned since.

But I still noticed her. May was there, blonde hair kneeling in front of a shelf, books sprawled around her, open to assorted pages. Her lab-coat draped over her crouched figure in a flattering manner and the white stood vibrant against the various aged woods and dulled glass that constructed her surroundings. She didn't notice me - her face was hidden by a thick reference book of some sort – but I knew it was her and without moving from the staircase I called to her.

“May.” No response. “Hey, May.” At her name she peeked over the hefty text and, upon seeing me, fully lowered it to her lap.

“Chris,” she called back, not moving from her kneel. “Where have you been?”

“What? Were you expecting me?”

“Of course. I'm here to help you. Why would I be in your memory of a library by myself?” She was placing the book amongst the others surrounding her, no longer even looking at me.

“Memory? What? I'm meeting Hanna here.”

“No, you aren't. Come over here.”

“I'm already late. I was just-“

“Chris, you're in the Window,” she said, actually acknowledging me with eye contact.

“You know that, right?”

My head tilted and I shuffled the right side of my hair. “I mean, I think I knew...”

“It's okay if you didn't,” she reassured me. “I was disoriented at first, as well.”

“I’m not disoriented,” I said, dismounting the staircase and approaching May and her ring of books. “I just, I just don’t really remember what I was doing. How I got here.”

“You said you were here to see Hanna, correct?” She granted me another quick glance before pulling another book from the shelf.

“Yeah,” I responded, now standing directly in front of her, staring down. She clammed the latest book shut rather forcefully and angled her head towards me.

“Well, don’t let me distract you,” she said. “Go find her.”

She wasn’t on the ninth floor like I had hoped; just some other young couple fondling their way through a stack of Plath and Ginsberg and other collections that helped them feel knowledgeable. I paced the entire floor, even working my way back to the staircase, exploring the eighth and seventh floors for a few minutes each before resigning myself back to the first floor lobby. It was then I saw my Hanna, leg-crossed on a bench, impatiently swiping at her phone’s touch-screen.

“Honey,” I said, pulling her attention from her smartphone. The natural strawberry of her hair shone, but still showed touches of fading and damage around the tips. Even under the fake library light.

“There you are,” she replied.

“Here I am.”

“Where have you been?”

Hands in pockets, my eyes sharpened. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been here for like thirty minutes,” she said. “You didn’t get any of my texts?” I reeled my phone from the pocket and stared at the shiny rectangle intently. The backlight rose and illuminated ‘Four Unread Messages.’

“Well, no. No I didn’t,” I replied, still engaged with the screen. “Are you sure you sent them? You couldn’t have been here for half an hour. That’s impossible.” Before she could give any response I put the cell phone away and looked her in the eyes. “I’ve been here. Looking for you.”

“If you’ve been here, why weren’t you here?”

“I’m telling you-“

“I’m telling you, I’ve been sitting here the entire time.” Toes were tapping now, an irritating metronome.

“Dear, that’s literally impossible. I was late. You weren’t here. I assumed you were further upstairs.”

“If you were late, you would’ve seen me. Sitting here.”

“Are you really arguing with me about whether I was late or not?”

“Well I *know* how long I’ve been here. Just like I know I texted you.”

“And you think I don’t know where I’ve been, what I’ve been doing? Right? You think I just live in some isolated bubble?”

“You know how you get sometimes.”

“Really? We’re going to do this here? In the goddamn library?”

“You probably waltzed in here – late, of course – and sped right passed me. Didn’t even notice me sitting here. The entire time.” As our voices rose, escalating to mirror peaks each of us were setting, I could feel the glares of librarians and desk clerks stabbing me in the back.

May was on the same floor, same position as where I had left her, only there were more books slap-dashed around her.

“Did you find her?” she asked.

“I know what you’re looking for.”

“I would hope so,” she replied, handing me a too-thick textbook. Grabbing it, feeling the slight stick of the cover on my fingers, gave the sense that half its weight was in dust. “We’re in this together, trying to solve your Writer’s Block.”

I tossed the book to the side and May shot me look, not of dismay, but of annoyance. “You’re looking in the wrong place.”

“How do you suppose that?”

“You’re thinking like a psychologist. A scientist. You’re looking for something in my past, some sort of specific event or instance that would give me Writer’s Block.”

“Of course I am,” she responded, placing her current book down and standing up. “To defeat the problem, we need to understand it. Know its origins.”

“You don’t, though,” I said, voice now quick and quippy. “Follow me.”

I took her hand and led her upwards. At first her feet dragged, were hesitant, but soon they became lighter, eagerly skipping over step after step after step. We wound around floors, possible exits, passing fiction and maps and manga and eventually even the ninth-floor poetry.

“I don’t get it; where are we going?” May asked as we continued ascending through the tenth floor large-prints.

“You were looking for the starting place, but we’re already at the end.”

“What?”

“This library already has every book Hanna and I – we – ever needed. My books are already here somewhere.” This memory of Hanna, it left something in my heart. It was a kind of tangible ache, a pebble in a balloon. I converted it to adrenaline with every pulse and it compelled me to ignore the gradual burning in my thighs that comes with scaling flights upon flights of stairs.

“So you know where it is? How?” May’s voice matched her movements, stuttering and winding down. As we crossed the archived newspapers of the twelfth floor I slowed my pace, mostly out of chivalry, but to also replenish my own breath. This floor was extra musty and I tasted it coating my lungs as I inhaled.

“I’ve never seen them,” I admitted as we mounted another staircase. “Hanna and I have been in every room, on every floor, in every corner of this place, and I have not seen them. So they must be somewhere I haven’t been before.”

After the fourteenth floor it seemed like the staircase never ended. It was a mile-long expanse upwards, a Sisyphusian endeavor. Minutes passed, folded into hours, and I wanted to quit, wanted to lie right across the jagged edges of the steps. I could hear May’s exhausted pants in my periphery, but they were largely overpowered by the heartbeat within my ear. When we hit the fifteenth floor not a single stair in the universe had been unstepped by us. My legs were cement and I could recall wafts of the morning’s bile at the base of my skull. May was a few steps behind me, nearly collapsing by the time her feet connected with the floor. Slick salt glistened on her blank flesh with various white strands matted to her scalp.

“Still alive?” I asked. She replied with a nod and a dry-heave. There was a shush from the floor below, some snooty librarian unaware of our struggle. “Good. We’re almost there.”

Against the dimmest wall of the fifteenth floor was a maintenance panel. Pulling it down from the ceiling – as I expected – revealed a ladder. Roof access. A voice scratching my skull desperately wished May had been outfitted in a skirt of some sort, but I actively repressed it and began climbing.

The night was pitch black, as if a single cloud had been stretched and puttied over every star in the sky. Still, the sight of dozens more rows of bookcases greeted me as I emerged onto the roof. The previous encapsulated silence of the library was somehow further washed out by the evening’s cool wind, gently whipping its way around me. I took two or three paces towards the closest bookshelf as May flopped out of the ladder behind me.

“Are you okay?”

Heavy panting. Completely supine.

“Do you need help?”

“Just,” she blurted between oxygen, shifting and squirming in the roof-gravel. “Just a minute.” I left her there to regain her composure and cracked open the first book within my reach.



## Found

There was a lake. I remembered it, and as I continued to read it became clearer and clearer. It belonged to Hanna's family – well, the cabin and dock and whatever jutting into it did – and we had spent many summer weeks up there over the past several years. It was a majestic escape from the city clutter; it was empty, but not hollow like the suburbs. Empty, like there was room to finally exhale, room to appreciate something shining and wet. Like the lake.

I suppose it helped that the lake was beautiful – the light laid on it just right and occasionally ducks or geese would paddle about, their movements like gentle brushstrokes rippling the water's surface rather than distorting it. Hanna and I would watch it, fully-reclined in flimsy chairs on the edge of the dock, sighing sighs of satisfaction, slipping each other smiled glances, hands over hands and skin sheened with sunblock and bug spray.

"My parents used to bring me here every summer when I was little," Hanna said one sunny day.

"Yeah."

"I always thought, one day, I'd bring my kids down here." Our chairs were shoved close together and she was half-slouched into mine, in my arms, head against my heartbeat. Looking back felt like looking at a cheap postcard, but that didn't change how it actually happened or the warmth I felt.

"Of course, dear."

"And you?"

"I don't own a lake."

“Chris.”

“I don’t swim,” I lied. “I’m afraid I would drown my non-existent kid.” At this, she squirmed from my arms and gave me a sudden shove – both feet and arms pushed me – and as I opened my mouth to exclaim surprise it filled with dirt-water. The splash engulfed me but I was able to surface after only a second. My head broke the water and was greeted by the sound of Hanna’s laughter. Not condescending, not cruel, but playful laughter. My impact had startled many of the geese or ducks and they had ascended, creating a relaxing sound akin to sheets being draped above me.

“Why?”

Still laughing, she stretched over the dock to help pull me up. Of course, I gripped her forearm and with a swift tug she was in the water beside me.

“Chris.”

“Yes, dear?” I replied, sputtering tepid, bitter water with each word.

“You’re swimming.”

“Nope. Just floating.” There was more splashing and laughter.

“Chris?”

My attention broke from the book and turned to May, who carried some sort of urgency. As if she had been calling my name and I hadn’t responded.

“Sorry, what?”

“What did you find?” A book was splayed across her hands as well, but I assumed if anything important was in it, she wouldn’t be asking about mine.

“Nothing. Memories.”

“Of course they’re memories, Chris, but are any of them important?”

My eyes danced back across the open pages in front of me before returning to May. “To my Writer’s Block? No.” She made a kind of hum before shelving her book and pulling another.

“It’s about your girlfriend, isn’t it?”

“Yours too?”

“Don’t have a girlfriend,” she deadpanned. I laughed and her smirk said she was almost too pleased with herself. “But yes, every book on every shelf I’ve checked so far has been memories of Hanna.”

“It’s strange,” I mumbled, putting away the lake story and drawing another leather-bound memory from the shelf. Opening it summoned a plume of dust and an audible creak of the spine; I lightly flicked the cover page with my index finger so as not to tear it.

Before the lease, the apartment, the bills, the brown-blond-not-green hair and the stilted breakfasts and television white noise there was this cabin and this lake. Even still, neither of those mattered. It didn’t matter what they were, but that they existed. Neither was my studio apartment or the house Hanna shared with three bobble-headed girls. It was a place where the two of us intersected, where we could speak or coo or whisper about futures. We could simply melt into each other. It was the luxury of silence and the decadent emptiness of having nothing except each other. Before that became normalcy.

“Bruce Wayne,” I said.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she responded, eyes widening, mouth amused in a smile. “Bruce Wayne is what you want to name your son?”

“What’s wrong with Bruce Wayne?”

“Batman.”

“Yeah, Hanna. That’s why it’s awesome.”

“Well,” she laughed, burying herself even closer to me. “Someone’s going to need a different woman if they want a child named after a cartoon character. Especially one whose parents were murdered.” I poked her nose playfully and kissed her forehead and we shared a giggle.

“I suppose it’s a good thing I don’t want a child, then.”

With a pang of hesitation I closed the book and fed it back into the shelf. “But it’s really not,” I continued. “You read my thing, May. I’ve been with her for years. Like, *been* been with her. Longer than any other friend or roommate or really anything.”

“I realize that,” she replied coldly. “I guess I’m just shocked. It seems like a lot of information. Especially in this... format.” She fingered through dozens of pages at once, grazing for keywords, ignoring subtext. “Do you write about her a lot, then?”

“Not exactly.”

“You write what you know though, right?”

“That would be severely limiting, I’m afraid,” I chuckled. “I don’t know much. And what I do know doesn’t matter.”

“Geez,” she responded. “Maybe we should stop searching for Writer’s Block and do something about that depression.” There was sure to be some rule or general moral code that kept doctors from saying such things to a patient, but I still gave an amused snort.

“I thought, by this point, you knew I’m a very pessimistic, empty person.” I turned the page, but before I could lose myself in the words May began speaking again.

“I don’t know, it just seems like a waste.” She said the statement like one would lob a ball, unsure of intention. It stuck, though.

“What?” I responded.

“You have all this information, literally dozens and dozens of shelves of books on the roof of a sizeable library. And each book I’ve opened has been a different collection of memories; many happy, many sad. Many I’m not sure what the hell they mean or why they need to be laying about here at all.” May finished this thought by dropping whatever book she held in her hand. Her fingers just unclasped and it fell, thumping on the gravel below.

“And that’s a waste to you?”

“I mean,” she started. I watched her, eyes flickering, cheeks pulling, gears turning. “They’re on a roof.” She made a sweeping motion I found strange, as if I couldn’t see how vast it was, how many books there were. “You obviously aren’t reading them. No one is. They’re just occupying space. Existing.”

“It’s not that,” I started. “I wrote all of these.”

“Not to be gloomy, but it just seems meaningless. Empty, a bit.”

“May,” I replied. “I can’t think of anything gloomier.” Looking at her eyes, they appeared duller than ever, with only the slightest hint of color distinguishing them from her cold skin. “Are you okay?”

“I think so,” she lulled. “It’ just... I mean, aren’t you going to break up with her, anyway?” she asked. This question, so blatant and unexpected, for some reason did not shock me. It had come from her mouth, but it itched me as if it had been circling, lingering, my mind for quite some time. And although her mouth was not the place it should have come from, it finally came forth nonetheless. So I stood there, the harsh wind and nighttime stars entirely

removed from the foreground. It was no longer a rooftop, just a dead end with me and May and a hoard of books I could not – may never – bring myself to torch. And as I replied to her with a, “No,” there was a lingering silence, as if she didn’t know how to respond. Maybe that was because I had no clue. Maybe it was because I had warped May into a cartoon, a device. Maybe it was because we both knew I was lying. Partially. I was already envisioning some reality where the flames were rising higher and higher and May and I were watching the entire library burn to the ground through some window in the distance. I wanted to feel her, like a dog chasing a car, just for a moment. But that’s all it would be.

I was coming down, descending the stairs passed the ninth floor, when I saw Hanna.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” I replied. “You’re still here.”

“A date is a date,” she replied. “If the plans are made, why change them?”

“I didn’t think you’d be here.”

“Well, I am,” she sighed, as if in disbelief herself.

“Want to get out of here? Go back home?”

“Home?” she asked. “You do remember we aren’t living together yet, don’t you?”

“But we will,” I said, taking her hand as she joined me on the staircase. I kissed her on the cheek and I drew a pang of fulfillment from the expression of content she had on her face.

“Can’t say I’m looking forward to nagging you about bills and making your dinners.”

“Can’t say I’m looking forward to keeping the toilet seat down.” We laughed, we smiled, and we began our march down the stairs, taking each one as it came, although I didn’t know where we were going. It was true, I had no idea how to get out. But I knew I’d figure it out.

## **So How Does Your Novel End?**

“You aren’t actually interested, are you?”

“Why not. You said it would make sense when it was finished. And you must know how you’re finishing it.”

“Yeah, kind of. But what if you still don’t get it?”

“Then I’ll tell you I hate it and we’ll go to dinner.”

Laughter

“You really want to know?”

“Of course.”

“So the protagonist – still don’t have a name – can’t handle it anymore; fifty-plus years of endless winning and it’s driving him insane. So he buys a gun, goes home. He puts it to his head and pulls the trigger.”

“You kill him?”

“No. The gun backfires. Or jams or something.”

“And that’s how you’re ending it?”

“Yeah. When I end it.”

“I hate it,” she laughed and smiled and we kissed.

“Too bad.”